Here are the words putting science in the crosshairs of Trump's orders

National Science Foundation staff have been combing through thousands of active science research projects, alongside a list of keywords, to determine if they include activities that violate Trump's executive orders.

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"Women." "Diverse." "Institutional." "Historically."

At the National Science Foundation, staff have been combing through thousands of active science research projects, alongside a list of keywords, to determine if they include activities that violate executive orders President Donald Trump issued in his first week in office. Those include orders to recognize only two genders and roll back diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives. The search is driven by dozens of flagged words, according to an internal document reviewed by The Washington Post and two NSF employees with knowledge of the review process who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak.

The words triggering NSF reviews provide a picture of the sievelike net being cast over the typically politically independent scientific enterprise, including words like "trauma," "barriers," "equity" and "excluded."

A sampling of keywords drawing scrutiny to science at NSF include:

Advocacy

Antiracist

Barrier

Biases

Cultural relevance

Disability

Diverse backgrounds

Scientists who receive NSF funding were already put on notice last week to cease any activities that do not comply with the executive orders. "In particular, this may include, but is not limited to conferences, trainings, workshops, considerations for staffing and participant selection, and any other grant activity that uses or promotes the use of diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility (DEIA) principles and frameworks or violates federal anti-discrimination laws," a message to investigators said.

Previously published health documents have been expunged from public-facing websites in the wake of <u>a Jan. 29 memo from Charles Ezell</u>, acting director of the Office of Personnel Management, that was sent to all agency leaders. The memo instructed agency forms to record only an individual's sex and not gender identity. It also called for websites and social media to be scrubbed of content that "inculcate or promote gender ideology," among other requirements.

In the wake of the memo, some published reports were removed from the Patient Safety Network website, an online resource produced by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). In one instance, a case study of a patient with endometriosis was taken down because the final paragraph said "it is important to note that endometriosis can occur in trans and non-gender-conforming people and lack of understanding this fact could make diagnosis in these populations even more challenging," said Patrick Romano, a physician at the University of California at Davis and co-editor in chief of PSNet.

At the <u>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention</u>, staff were given a list of about 20 terms to guide decisions <u>to remove or edit content on the website</u>. Those words include: gender, transgender, pregnant person, pregnant people, LGBT, transsexual, nonbinary, assigned male at birth, biologically male, biologically female, he/she/they/them.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the NSF's review. According to an internal document and people familiar with the review process, NSF staff must analyze the keywords within grants and determine whether they are in violation of an executive order, providing a justification if they determine they are not. For example, the word "accessibility" would be flagged if it is used in the context of DEI, but is not if it is about data accessibility, the document explains. An internal email sent as an update clarifies some "edge cases," including that the socioeconomic status of individuals is "implicated" in the executive order, but rural communities are part of geographic diversity and are not.

The NSF is a $9 billion agency that funds scientific research across the globe, including research stations in Antarctica and astronomy observatories. Grants also fund research into <u>quantum technologies</u>, biology and <u>earthquake risk</u>, and support training young scientists. NSF grants are awarded to projects that advance scientific discovery and have intellectual merit, but they are also required to have "broader impacts" on society. Those impacts encompass an array of goals, and many of them overlap with DEI, include broadening participation in science among underrepresented groups of people.

According to an internal document, NSF grants that are flagged for "further action" because they don't comply with the executive orders could be subject to a range of additional steps, including modification to be in compliance or being terminated in part or whole. A foundation spokesperson said they did not "have anything else to add beyond what is available on our website," when asked about the process.

Morteza Dehghani, a professor of psychology and computer science at the University of Southern California, said he learned of the keyword screenings from a colleague at the NSF, who shared the list with him along with a flowchart used to evaluate whether a research project should be flagged for further review. Dehghani said he finds the keyword screenings to be antithetical to the established process for reviewing scientific endeavors.

He is among a cadre of scientists who volunteer to serve on panels that assess the merits and rigor of research proposals to help determine if they are worthy of NSF grant funding. That peer-review process is considered to be fundamental to scientific integrity: For example, panel members cannot review funding proposals from colleagues or anyone with whom they share a personal connection. He called the process "among the biggest cultural products of essentially our time."

Dehghani called the keyword-based vetting "unprecedented within the history of the NSF."

Lena H. Sun contributed to this report.